journal of visual culture

Visual studies as media studies

Mark Poster

Visual studies, I propose, is most productively conceived as media studies. While there are excellent reasons for promoting visual studies as a problematic and as a field of study in its own right, I suggest it is best understood as part of a broader domain of the cultural study of information machines. Already visual studies is emerging as an important area of study. The initiation of this journal is one indication of the change. Academic programs in visual studies such as those at the University of Rochester and the University of California, Irvine are another. Readers in visual culture are beginning to proliferate; one edited by Nicholas Mirzoeff (1998) and another by Jessica Evans and Stuart Hall (1999) collect an impressive array of essays. At this crucial moment in the formation of the discipline of visual studies it is imperative to pose questions that promise to open the field in the most productive manner.

Certainly there are problems with the term 'visual culture'. When one attempts to define it or give it coherence, difficulties immediately emerge. Nicholas Mirzoeff, for example, begins his justly celebrated *An Introduction to Visual Culture* (1999) with a statement that betrays the issue: 'Human experience', he writes, 'is now more visual and visualized than ever before ...' But surely this cannot be so. Does it mean that we use our eyes more than in the past? I think not. Does it mean that we translate experience from other senses into the visual one? Again I think not. The measure of distance in the Middle Ages was often 'translated' from numbers into visual expression. A standard of measure in certain villages was how far one could see a red bird in a forest. To the people of the day who used this expression, the distance it designated was something quite specific, as useful as saying a certain expanse is 50 yards. In the expression, oral language deploys visual markers that define spatial relations. The visual was rendered in and through the non-visual. Moreover, the example clearly suggests that, in the Middle Ages, certain forms of

visual acuity were far more highly developed than today. It is therefore not the case, as Mirzoeff contends, that today humans are somehow more visual; rather we are only in different visual regimes from those of the past.

The great difference in visual regimes between ourselves and our ancestors from the Middle Ages concerns the spread of information machines in the present. It is not so much that we render visual the non-visual – think of the visual fantasies of spirits in the Middle Ages – but that we employ information machines to generate images and, as Virilio argues, to see. As the new field of visual studies develops, I urge that we not make the mistake of textual studies in the age of print: to disavow the material form in which the cultural object is received. Instead I propose that visual studies acknowledge the material form of its objects and in so doing conceives itself as part of media studies. In this way, visual studies avoids the need to proffer claims of uniqueness about contemporary visuality and also bypasses the equally noxious suggestion of the autonomy of the visual, as subject or object.

With regard to this second problem – the autonomy of the visual – I note the importance often given in the case for the study of visual culture to contemporary or postmodern forms of visuality. The argument often hinges, as it does in Mirzoeff's (1999) text, on the spread of forms of the visual through film, television and new media. What often gets elided in these discussions, however – in the case of film since the early 1930s and television from the beginning – is sound accompanied by the image. (Even in the era of the silents, the absence of sound in the image was 'corrected' by the live music.) The forgetting of sound in visual culture is a grievous error in my view. When a distinguished film studies scholar gave a lecture on Hitchcock's *Psycho* at my campus in the early 1990s, showing the shower scene clip, she failed to mention the extraordinary sounds from the Bernard Hermann score without which, I submit, the scene would lack most of its fascination.

The difficulty today of the term 'visual' is far more serious than it has been in film studies. New media integrate sound, text, still and moving images in a digital field determined by the capacity of information machines. D.N. Rodowick (1996), in his illuminating contribution to the *October* questionnaire on visual culture, insists rightly on the need to introduce the term 'audio-visual culture' because 'Our era is no longer one of images and signs. It is defined, rather, by simulacra.' The issue at stake is profound, as Rodowick shows, because the shift to 'audio-visual', or, in my preference, media, disrupts the foundational system of binaries that restricts visual studies – idea/matter, form/content, time/space, and so forth. Media studies insists on the materiality of the field in a manner that helps to avoid earlier ontological constraints. It opens the field of study to differences within regimes of visuality from the standpoint of the new media or simulacra or virtual, reconfiguring our understanding of past visual cultures. It allows or even promotes the study of machines that see alongside visual regimes of classic art history without necessarily privileging either. I contend that, properly understood, the juxtaposition of an original Vermeer painting with a virtual copy viewed on a computer screen benefits the comprehension of both images.

The dissemination of information machines alters basic attributes of culture. Humans and machines, in a potentially planetary arena, mix and intermingle to form new cultural objects and experiences. The category of media studies, I

contend, offers the best rubric for exploring visual culture in a manner that opens the field to the most troubling and provocative questions that face us in the present context. When media are fundamentally changing, as they are now, it behoves those of us concerned with visual culture to pose the questions in the broadest possible way. With media interacting with one another in unpredictable ways (one media such as the internet absorbing radio, film and television, while television absorbs the internet and film), with new technologies expanding existing media (fiber optic cables, new compression algorithms, wireless information transmission), with information machines taking on more and more human faculties (voice recognition, translation programs, sight capabilities of global positioning systems, expanded digital storage capacity) and so many unforeseeable possibilities on the horizon, we must theorize and study empirically visual culture accordingly.

These changes may be theorized in relation to the digitization of cultural objects. As text, sound and image are digitized they are placed in homogeneous code of electrons and light pulses. In earlier centuries, combining text, sound and image in cultural objects was either impossible or very difficult to achieve yet it is becoming the rule for digital media. Decades ago artists experimented with installations in which movements by audience members initiated computer selected sounds and images, for instance. With digitization, multimedia becomes the norm. To isolate the visual in this context becomes increasingly awkward and arbitrary, though it certainly remains possible. Digital media, then, invite a complex mixture of cultural forms.

But they do more than that. Digital media alter the relation of subject to object that characterized earlier epochs of visual culture. Globally networked computers, as the medium of culture, intensify the thickness of the mediation to the point that (human) subject and (cultural or visual) object no longer stand in the same relation to one another. None of the figures of the subject, be they that of creator or of audience, work in the same way as in the past. None of the figures of the object – printed book, painting, film, etc. – work in the same way as in the past. Kant's disinterested contemplation, Wagner's total artwork, Brecht's estrangement effect, Barthes' readerly text, romanticism's artist as genius, the Old Regime's artist as artisan, expressionism's action artist, and so forth – all are put into question when the medium itself is both subject and object, when digital media tear at the boundaries of the knower and the known, artist and consumer. In the digital medium, the art object becomes 'open content', available for material transformation as it is perceived and the relation between the artist and the viewer easily are reversed, cancelled and combined. The emphasis of cultural production shifts, in the domain of globally networked computing, to the medium itself, away from both the artist and the work. Or perhaps it would be better to say the shuffling of the terms leads to a complex apparatus in which the medium, the artist and the audience are articulated together in intricate combinations. In digital culture it perhaps makes no sense to isolate the virtues or faults of either the artist or the art object.

If I am right about the emergence of a new cultural landscape by dint of the digitization of text, sound and image, then the study of visual culture is best serviced by being recast into media studies. In that context, the visual might still be

studied at times in its own terms. But it would also be open to comparative and historical work that would include a definition of the limits of each medium in its concrete articulation. One could then understand a visual subject of say the 17th century as one who develops vision in relation to oil painting and hearing in relation to early baroque music. One could inquire into the specificity of such a cultural subject, comparing it with contemporary subjectivation in a multimedia environment, thereby understanding each in relation to the other. The tendency found too often to privilege either might be curtailed in favor of a sensitivity to cultural difference, engagements between cultures, and even what is nowadays called transculture. Without needing to surrender anything from the traditional methodologies of art history, film studies and other disciplines of cultural objects, a new media studies might open the frame to a history and theory of the trace, one that could make sense out of the line drawings in caves of our most ancient ancestors as well as the cultural forms that emerge from globally networked computers.

These remarks are of course no more than suggestions, perhaps to some provocations, intended to open a discussion more than to establish a position. At this early moment of the institutionalization of visual cultural studies what is needed, I believe, is an exploration of as many avenues of work as possible, a putting into discussion of as many perspectives as possible. I offer these short reflections in that spirit. Perhaps the j*ournal of visual culture* would benefit from a usenet group on the internet to extend the printed page into an asynchronous discussion of a different sort.

References

Evans, J. and Hall, S. (eds) (1999) *Visual Culture Reader*. London: Sage.
Mirzoeff, N. (ed.) (1998) *The Visual Culture Reader*. New York: Routledge.
Mirzoeff, N. (1999) *An Introduction to Visual Culture*. New York: Routledge.
Rodowick, D.N. (1996) 'Paradoxes of the Visual', *October* 77: 59–62.
Virilio, P. (1994) *The Vision Machine*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Mark Poster is Director of the Film Studies Program at the University of California, Irvine and a member of the History Department. He has a courtesy appointment in the Department of Information and Computer Science and is a member of the Critical Theory Institute. His recent books are: *What's the Matter with the Internet: A Critical Theory of Cyberspace* (University of Minnesota Press, 2001); *The Information Subject* in Critical Voices Series (Gordon and Breach Arts International, 2001); *Cultural History and Postmodernity* (Columbia University Press, 1997); *The Second Media Age* (Polity, 1995); and *The Mode of Information* (Blackwell, 1990).

Address: Department of History, University of California, Irvine, 300 Humanities Office Building, Irvine, CA 92697, USA. [email: poster@uci.edu]